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WILL THE REAL TERMINAL STUDENT PLEASE STAND UP.

BY- MCPHERSON, ELISABETH
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

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IN DISCUSSIONS OF THE "ILL-DEFINED" TERMINAL ENGLISH COURSE TWO QUESTIONS SHOULD BE ANSWERED--WHO ARE THE TERMINAL STUDENTS AND WHAT SHOULD THE TERMINAL COURSE TRY TO ACCOMPLISH. ALTHOUGH MANY SCHOOLS ALLOW TERMINAL STUDENTS TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES, A MORE "SUITABLE" ARRANGEMENT IS FOR THE COLLEGE TO IDENTIFY TERMINAL STUDENTS ON THE BASIS OF THEIR READING AND WRITING ABILITY. ONCE THE STUDENT IMPROVES, HOWEVER, HE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO TAKE TRANSFER COURSES. ONE MAJOR AIM OF THE TERMINAL ENGLISH COURSE IS TO HELP STUDENTS READ BETTER AND WITH CRITICAL SKILL. A SECOND MAJOR AIM IS TO PERSUADE STUDENTS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LOGICAL, CLEAR WRITING AND TO HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP WRITING SKILL. TO ACHIEVE THESE AIMS, QUESTIONS MUST BE ANSWERED CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT USAGE, TEACHING MATERIALS, AND STUDENT AND TEACHER ATTITUDES. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION," VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2, MAY 1967, PAGES 93-98. (BN)

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Will the Real Terminal Student Please Stand Up?

ELISABETH McPHERSON

PROBABLY NO AREA in the field of English teaching, from kindergarten's show-and-tell period through the doctoral dissertation, is more amorphous and ill-defined than the course known in some junior colleges as "terminal English." This paper offers no bibliography because there is precious little information available. Such mention of terminal English as occurs in recent NCTE publications, even those devoted to junior colleges, suggests merely that there is great opportunity here, and rather wistfully points out that the need for research is desperate. In addition to the NCTE publications and an occasional article in the *Junior College Journal*, recent CCCC conventions have devoted one workshop to terminal English. The chances are that no discussion will get far until two very important questions are answered: Who are the terminal students? What should the terminal course try to accomplish?

Because two-year colleges differ, the answer to the first question is not as obvious as it may seem. In some technical schools, all students are terminal; in a few feeder schools for four-year colleges, the terminal student is anybody who fails the college-level courses. In comprehensive community colleges, however, where the student body ranges from the half-reformed high school dropout to last year's valedictorian, and may include the grandmother of both of them, deciding who is a terminal student and who isn't becomes highly important. So who decides? Is the terminal student to be self-identified or school-identified?

If we let terminal students identify themselves—that is, if we place all those who say they mean to take a two-year technical course in terminal English and all those who announce their intention of seeking a B.A. in transfer English, what will we gain? One gain may be

that the self-defined terminal students will be better motivated if they think there is a direct relationship between the papers they write and the job they are training for; they will approach such classes in a better spirit than if they think they are being forced to deal with irrelevant rhapsodies about beautiful, beautiful sunsets.

Some of the vocational-technical faculty join their students in distrusting the content of general English courses; they tend to regard what goes on in the regular freshman course as extraordinarily esoteric, a kind of pledging ceremony for Master's candidates in the higher criticism, and they transpose some of this uneasiness into a suspicion that any English course not specifically designed for their own students is likely to be useless to any ordinary human being planning to lead a normal life. Further, some of them are quite frank about wanting courses that all their students will be sure to pass.

If separating students according to declared aims keeps both students and faculty happy, why not do it? The first and most cogent argument against it is that, whether or not they care now, the students themselves are being short-changed. Rigidly utilitarian English courses, restricted to the kind of reports these students will have to write once they become draftsmen or nurses, offer them no chance at the liberalizing and humanizing elements most of us believe necessary for satisfying lives.

Let's take a moment at this point to get straight what we *don't* mean by "liberalizing and humanizing elements." Although an occasional rhapsodist does slip into our ranks, very few English teachers really believe that the purpose of any college writing class is to describe sunsets or refer to Burns's poetic images as "ethereal birds flitting against a sunlight wall, who knows whither-from or whence-to." Unfortunately, there are just enough rhapsodists around to give some substance to the myth, and an occasional junior college administrator who sees himself as a "practical man" seems to get as much comfort and security from this misconceived hasty generalization as Linus does from his blanket. By liberalizing and humanizing, we mean developing attitudes that, although they may not contribute to an immediate increase in salary, can at least keep the student from being duped now and then and at best can contribute to a richer and fuller life. Terminal students certainly don't need to gush about sunsets, but they do need to develop habits of clear, orderly expression that will apply equally well to a draftsman's report or an argument to the planning commission. They have no need for esoteric literary criticism, but they will have a continuing need for some critical ability to help them separate sense from illogical nonsense in union proposals and political campaigns.

Secondly, even if we were to concede that vocational students would be temporarily better off in courses specifically tailored to fit their particular trades, have we any right to offer such narrow training when technology is changing so fast that many trades are obsolete before the ink dries on the vocational certificates? When retraining becomes necessary, the student who has had a broader, more flexible English course will surely have an advantage.

Equally important, perhaps, is the question of where such specialization stops. Already many schools offer English for secretaries and English for engineers. Do we need English for nurses? English for automotive mechanics? English for cooks? Such proliferation of courses can lead only to proliferation of jargon: shall we offer English for elementary teachers, in which the eager students are taught to write that Johnny "suffers from malfunctioning of the ego due to compulsive obesity" when they

mean that Johnny would be better off if he weren't so greedy?

There are several serious drawbacks to the program that lets the terminal student identify himself and then develops specialized courses catering to his supposedly special needs. A more sensible alternative is for the college to identify terminal students on the basis of their present ability in reading and writing. Clearly we need some measuring instruments better refined than the standardized tests or thirty-minute diagnostic themes now available to us, but a consideration of sectioning materials is beyond the scope of this paper. Whatever method we use, when we make a realistic identification of terminal students based on their present English ability, what we are saying is not that one *student* is terminal and another transfer, but that the English *course* he begins with is terminal; that is, the course is not intended to transfer to a four-year college. A program that groups students according to present achievement, rather than vocational intentions, assumes that all segments of the population, from data processors to potential doctors, need training in clear expression and logical thinking. The student who continues to regard himself as a transfer student can move from the terminal course into regular freshman English whenever he demonstrates a reasonable chance of succeeding there, and the capable technical student will have been given a writing course as challenging as his abilities deserve. He has been protected against the "dead end course" that worried Eley when he prepared his report on terminal English for the Tempe conference. Moreover, the technical student will have stored up some transfer credit if, two years or ten years from now, he changes his mind about going on to college.

Some schools offer a three-track system: terminal English for the terminal student, transfer English for the well-prepared, and remedial English for the self - identified transfer - hopeful who wants one more chance to do in a quarter what he has failed to accomplish in the last twelve years. The student in remedial English may not know the statistical odds against such attempts, but most of his teachers do. If he is one of the eighty percent who fail the one-shot remedial course, what becomes of him? Does he move back into the terminal program where plenty of writing at his own level might have given him much needed practice in organization and coherence, or does he "terminate" in the fullest sense of the word? Many four-year schools have abandoned remedial programs, partly because they weren't getting anywhere with them and partly in the comfortable belief that the junior colleges will take up the burden. Might junior colleges also be justified in relegating conventional remedial courses to the night program and concentrating on more practical approaches to reading and writing in the general terminal course? Where such approaches have been tried, at least as much remedying seems to take place in them as occurs in one last dogged attack on rules for punctuation and the identification of prepositions.

Thus we arrive at the second and more difficult question: what should the terminal course try to accomplish? Some of its aims are implicit in the discussion of who the students will be. More explicitly stated, however, the main aims are these: (1) to help the student get more understanding from what he reads and to approach his reading matter, whatever it is, with increased critical skill; (2) to persuade the student that good expository writing, whatever its subject may be, is clear, definite, logical, and orderly, and to help him put some logic and order in his own writing, even though mechanical perfection may remain beyond his reach. In other words, a good terminal program should lift the

really valuable elements from the regular freshman course and offer them on a simpler level, using language and materials that these students can understand.

The first step in setting up such a program is a genuine agreement among those who will teach it that choice usage is not necessarily a prerequisite for orderly thinking and clear expression. Unless such a conviction exists, and unless it is periodically reiterated, most overworked teachers are likely to take the easy way out and grade for mechanics instead of content. But the minute the student's writing is judged primarily on spelling errors and comma splices, the terminal program is in danger of becoming just one more bonehead course. The successful terminal teacher must be prepared to forgive weak spelling, fragmentary punctuation, and awkward sentences. He must concentrate instead on the underlying idea that redeems them. Even if the teacher has trouble finding a redeeming idea, he must still keep reminding both himself and the student that the absence of an idea is a fault more grievous than the absence of a predicating verb.

Once we have found teachers willing to overlook their own natural predilection for choice written English, what can we do to eliminate student prejudice against what they consider a sub-standard course? Getting into transfer English becomes a status symbol, and the student assigned to the terminal course arrives for the first session feeling demeaned or belligerent or both. Probably not much can be done to combat these defensive attitudes. For generations students have unerringly labeled as "bonehead" the lower part of any ability-sectioned program, no matter what euphemistic term the college has devised for it: remedial, technical, terminal, nontransfer, or, most recently, "repair English." But students are usually pretty good judges of the quality of the material offered to them; their defensiveness will relax if they can be convinced that what they are being asked to do in this English class is realistic and meaningful. Defensiveness may disappear altogether in those students who discover that for the first time they are being given a real chance to succeed in an English class.

Another sticky question that follows on the decision to emphasize ideas rather than mechanical correctness is how standards are to be maintained. If "anything goes," what is left to grade on? Should we automatically pass all the students sleeping comfortably in the back row, regardless of the quality of their work (if any)? Clearly not. Terminal English concentrates on essentials and, without belittling the value of standard usage, treats it as an incidental grace. Such a course creates its own integrity. First, the writing assignments must be completed and the directions followed. Second, the student's writing should be realistically evaluated, with most of the attention given to how well he has found the purpose of his writing, and whether he has stated his point clearly and supported it rationally.

Not all students will or should pass this course. Some will fail because they don't do the work. Others will fail because they cannot organize or express even the most elementary ideas. But the same attitudes and abilities that cause them to fail this course would prevent them from writing a coherent report or filling out an accurate order. Even though terminal courses take students where they find them, unless we take them some place from there, such courses will become no more than empty gestures—a way of salving our itching notion that everybody's transcript should show credit in something called "English."

When we do insist on standards, even though those standards are different from those of the transfer course, we must convince our colleagues in other

areas that the standards we use are reasonable, realistic, necessary, and fair rather than just another device by which the English department serves as axeman to keep their favorite students from graduating. We can convince our colleagues more easily if the terminal course results, as it should, in improved work in other courses.

How much time will be needed to improve the student's writing? Because his skills are less, he should spend at least as much time on English as his friend in the transfer section. We can't hope to do much for these students if we offer them less than three class hours extending through the whole year, and more would be better. If many of them are vocational or technical students, however, their programs may already be filled with time-consuming laboratory courses, and the suggestion that they set aside even more time for a writing course will bring vigorous howls from all directions. This scarcity of student time probably accounts for the integrated communications courses that try to combine reading, listening, writing, and sometimes literature in a single one-year course.

Undoubtedly these terminal students need reading help somewhere in the program, if for no other reason than that reading and writing skills are closely intertwined. In addition, nearly all of these students need a wide range of help in reading for its own sake. Some need enough knowledge of elementary phonetics to cope with unknown words; others need to accelerate beyond a hundred words a minute on easy material. The question is not whether the terminal English course should include reading but only how the reading is to be handled. Shall time be taken from the writing course, where it is badly needed, and given to reading, or should special reading courses or laboratories be set up?

And how much literature should the course include? If we insist that English deserves attention because it is a liberalizing and humanizing discipline on any level of achievement, we certainly can not ignore literature. Again, however, if we really mean to make some realistic alteration in thinking and writing habits, we need the whole year for writing. Surely it is not unreasonable to require some literature in the second year. Do the literature courses too need to be sectioned according to ability? Many schools get along with a single introductory course serving both terminal and transfer students. Other schools are experimenting with non-transfer humanities courses, in which they combine and relate introductions to literature, music, painting, and drama. The rationale here seems to be that, even though nobody has time for everything, the terminal student should be given at least a taste of the arts.

If student time is a major consideration, staff time presents an even greater problem. Just as these students need more time and more practice to improve their writing, so they need more individual attention. If maximum class size for regular composition is 25, with no teacher having more than three writing sections, as the Weingarten report recommends, maximum class size for these terminal courses should be 20 (15 is better), with no teacher having more than two sections. These figures mean money for extra staff; a properly taught terminal program is expensive. There is, of course, no way of knowing how many promising programs have been scuttled by the college budget.

Suppose, however, the money is available from an enlightened administration which insists that junior college graduates must read and write competently, how shall the staff be chosen? Will these courses be better taught by finding—or at least, seeking—specialists in terminal English? (Aside from the self-styled ones, are there any?) Or can we offer an

adequate program by asking most of the teachers in the department to diversify their approach and keep themselves flexible by dividing their time between transfer and terminal English?

Once the staff has been recruited, what teaching materials do they use? Certainly not a drill program that runs the student around and around the same old treadmill that made him dizzy long before. Four years ago there was little to choose from; the teacher could select either material that defeated the student because it was unrealistically sophisticated or material that bored the student with hopeless juvenility. Within the last year, however, national publishers have brought out four books written especially for terminal courses, and doubtless next year will see even more. But even though texts are available, the department must still decide to what extent English should be a tool subject, not in the special sense of helping draftsmen write the kind of reports the local industries want but in the more general sense of helping students read the texts assigned in their other courses or write the kind of essay exams that will convince their other teachers that they have understood the material of the course. The teacher must also decide to what extent he will supplement the text with current material from local newspapers or national magazines.

All these questions demand our attention, and there is at least one more: should credit for terminal English apply toward an AA degree, or should that degree be limited to those who can complete the first two years of a transfer program? Although this may seem a decision for the entire college, in a very real sense the recommendation made by the English department about credit for its own courses may influence the policy the whole college adopts.

In one way it is encouraging to be faced with so many unanswered questions. The questions mean that the junior college has an opportunity to develop a meaningful course of its own, independent of what the high schools have done or the senior colleges insist that we do. Whether the course we develop is really meaningful, however, will depend on the way we answer the two really important questions: Who are the terminal students? What should the terminal program try to do for them?

Clark College
Vancouver, Washington

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